

MOSCOW ENDORSES PARIS-BONN EFFORT IN LITHUANIA CRISIS

MIDDLE GROUND SOUGHT

Soviets Now Seek Measures by the Republic Short of Independence Repeal

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MOSCOW, April 28 — The Soviet Government reacted favorably today to the effort by France and West Germany to ease the crisis over Lithuania's declaration of independence. President Mikhail S. Gorbachev's spokesman described the effort as "sober advice" and "a kind of appeal for reason against extremism."

At the same time, the spokesman, Arkady Maslennikov, also stressed that Mr. Gorbachev was not now insisting that Lithuania immediately rescind its declaration of independence.

Mr. Gorbachev had taken this more moderate position two weeks ago when, preparing for economic sanctions, he demanded the immediate repeal of simpler Lithuanian laws affecting sovereignty.

Searching for Middle Ground

The French-German effort, in the form of a letter to Lithuania's President, has clearly made the situation more fluid, although both sides remain far apart, with both the Soviet Union and Lithuania demanding sovereignty under their clashing constitutions. But beyond such hard demands, the principals appear to be searching harder for middle ground in the light of the letter.

"They should not insist on implementation," Mr. Maslennikov said of the Lithuanian leaders, referring to the French-German proposal for a freeze on the March 11 declaration of independence. "They can find some way of phrasing, of putting a moratorium."

The Kremlin thus spoke in virtual parallel with the proposal of Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany and President François Mitterrand of France that Lithuania temporarily suspend the enforcement of its declaration of independence as a gesture to get serious negotiations with Moscow under way.

'Face-Saving Device' Possible

"If they see in that letter a kind of face-saving device, let them," Mr. Maslennikov said at a Kremlin news conference. "We are not very keen on appearing victorious. We are for the essence of the process."

While insisting that the Soviet Constitution was the only basis for an eventual solution, the spokesman gave no immediate indication of how the Kremlin would react should Lithuania adopt

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the moratorium on carrying out independence.

"We don't prescribe," he said when asked how Lithuania might act to get negotiations under way.

Landsbergis Is Receptive

The Lithuanian President, Vytautas Landsbergis, said today that the letter was a "constructive proposal." He still insisted that "we cannot rescind our constitution even temporarily," but he quickly spoke of a "temporary confederative link" or other hypothetical

relation with Moscow during a transition to independence.

Similarly, Mr. Gorbachev, who also has been insisting that Lithuania must eventually observe the Soviet Constitution and return to the fold, took the tack two weeks ago of making this secondary to dealing with the simpler issue of new Lithuanian laws on the Soviet draft and identity papers.

In similar fashion, when Mr. Maslennikov was asked whether the Kremlin would be satisfied with a temporary suspension of the implementation of independence, he replied, "You may say so, without specifying what 'tempo-

rary' is." This was a reference to new Soviet procedures that allow republics to secede through a process that can take up to five years, a process Lithuania rejects but which no one has yet attempted.

The spokesman's moderate tone was in decided contrast to the situation of a month ago, when the Kremlin began its war of nerves and sent tanks through Vilnius, the Lithuanian capital.

That was followed by economic retaliation, embargoes on fuel and factory materials that appear to be softening Lithuanian resolve against seeking a compromise in the crisis.

Mr. Maslennikov contended that the

proposal by Paris and Bonn, sent Thursday in the letter to Lithuania, was in far greater accord with the Soviet position and "two worlds away" from the "extremism" of the Lithuanian leadership. He said that in urging an amicable settlement, Mr. Kohl and Mr. Mitterrand were implicitly recommending the reality of the European boundaries set after World War II, with Lithuania included in the Soviet Union.

Lithuania and the other two Baltic republics, Estonia and Latvia, were forcibly annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. The present crisis began when the Lithuanian Parliament claimed independence on March 11 and then demanded negotiations with the Kremlin.

Mr. Gorbachev rebuffed the demand and repeatedly called the action unconstitutional. But the Kremlin's most recent remarks, stressed again by Mr. Maslennikov, is that repeal need not be immediate and that initial attention can go to a series of independence laws passed in Lithuania affecting such issues as the Soviet military draft and republic identity cards.

'To Return to Reason'

Mr. Maslennikov was asked about Mr. Gorbachev's view of the Paris-Bonn letter. "As far as I know the President's thinking, I think it is sober advice to the leaders of present-day Lithuania," he said, "to return to reason, to start talking politically."

He added, "We consider it's a kind of appeal for reason against extremism, extremism being a policy of present-day Lithuanian leaders."

In defending the Kremlin's position in the crisis, Mr. Maslennikov repeatedly cited public opinion polls by United States news organizations that showed about 60 percent of the American public supporting President Bush's decision not to take action in the crisis lest the improved East-West relations wrought by Mr. Gorbachev be put at risk.

"He is more representative of public opinion in his country than those who say let's burn all the bridges and let's introduce sanctions against the Soviet Union," Mr. Maslennikov said, adding that sanctions would harm the world. "The process of disarmament would be stopped, the political process in Europe would be hampered."